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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the U.S. educational system foundations, with particular emphasis on the state of Florida and contrasts that system with the Hungarian system, long under the communist control of the Soviet Union. Funding, educational initiative, and curriculum control are discussed. The paper concludes with accounts of personal experiences in Hungary and observations of the rudiments of democratic citizenship and citizenship education. The paper summarizes that citizenship education has support in both the United States and Hungary and that educational reform is underway in individual classrooms across the nations. (EH)

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Civic Education:
Tradition and Change in Florida and Hungary

by Sheila Keller, Pinellas County Schools

For the General Welfare

Although the framers of the Constitution of the United States made no mention of a national system of education, the federal government has always supported formal schooling. This support was established in the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Using the "general welfare clause" of the Constitution (Section 8, article i), the federal government has required that all states joining the union provide satisfactory public education. By 1804, with the Ohio Territory Act, the states accepted custodianship and assumed control of federal school support.

Since that time a series of Supreme Court decisions has played a part in guiding the course of education in the United States. This guidance has continued in the proliferation of federal statutes addressing specifics in education from agriculture to exceptional students to issues of equity. The U.S. Department of Education, in its various forms, was established by Congress in 1867. It does not administer U.S education in general, but has assumed control over a variety of projects supported by the federal government.

Shared Responsibility

The federal, state and local organization and administration of education in this country can be described as an interdependent partnership of fifty-one[1] distinct state systems of education and more than 16,000 local school systems.

In this country each state has its own board of education, sometimes elected, sometimes appointed. These boards are usually less powerful than national ministries of education in other

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[1] Includes the District of Columbia administered by the federal government.

countries. The duties of these state boards vary, but they generally are concerned with the distribution of state or federal funds and the enforcement of educational statutes, basic requirements for graduation, adoption of textbooks, certification of teachers, and the approval of building standards. They seek to improve education as a function of government, equalization of education and educational leadership.

The majority of decisions about curriculum and instruction and the governance of schools in the U.S. are made at the local level by elected (90%) school boards which are usually independent of other agencies of local government. While there are similarities among these thousands of systems in terms of attendance requirements, common academic disciplines and specific federally supported programs, this decentralized pattern has resulted in fiercely independent and unique school operations.

Florida Tradition

The Florida Constitution, Article IX, established the state system of education and determines its structure. The state Board of Education consists of the Governor and the members of the Cabinet, including the elected Commissioner of Education. The Department of Education is responsible for recommending policy, establishing procedure and distributing funds as it implements federal and state statutes passed by the corresponding legislative bodies.

In this state each of our sixty-seven counties is a school district. An elected school board administers all public schools in each district. This board sets policy for the operation of the school district. It acts on the recommendation of a superintendent of schools who is either appointed by the board or elected. The majority of school superintendents in Florida are elected. All governmental bodies in Florida are required to meet "Sunshine Law" provisions which prohibit non-public discussion or deliberation of school issues.

Each school in a district is composed of a principal, administrative staff, guidance counselor(s), teaching faculty and non-instructional staff. Schools are also required to establish School Advisory Committees, which include parents, teachers, students, and business and community representatives. These committees approve the school improvement plan required by legislation related to school accountability.

While there is no national civic curricula for U.S. schools there are traditions that have been established through practice. These standards are reflected in Florida schools.

In the primary years, Florida students explore the relationship of the individual to the family and their role as citizens in their local communities. Children learn about patriotic leaders and are encouraged to appreciate their value to our society.

In upper elementary grades, the study becomes more discipline based and students formally study the state history. At the fifth grade students learn about the structure of our government and their responsibilities in a participatory democracy. In many districts local law enforcement agencies provide programs at this time.

During the middle years, the curriculum reflects a more global perspective with students studying cultures and times that have produced ideas and practices that are the foundation of the U.S. government. Elective courses also become available, allowing students to study Civics and law. At the eighth grade, they repeat the fifth grade curricula with a study in U.S. History. In Florida, a growing number of districts are choosing to end the middle school study with a course in Florida: Challenges and Choices, which is an application of civics with students learning to identify issues of importance to their local communities and practicing civic behaviors.

During high school students experience more in-depth studies of the principles and practices of government and economics and of world and U S History. Although not required, there are a variety of law and civics electives offered

There's Something Happening Here

The tradition of civic education in the United States is well established. It is, in fact, a requirement of a participatory democracy. But as our society has become more diverse and more complex the need to increase the frequency and sophistication of civic education has become evident. Through the support of nongovernmental organizations such as The Center for Civic Education at the national level and the Florida Law Related Education Association in Florida, civic education programs have expanded to all grade levels, opened up to partnerships with law related professions and moved out of the textbook into the community.

Florida has gained recognition as a leader in the creation of law magnets, academies, institutes and micro society simulation programs as well as connecting to the world in which our children live. These programs combine citizenship and constitutional studies with career exploration in law-related fields. These unique programs provide a practical application of law to the lives of students. They provide meaningful opportunities for students to understand and practice democratic values and citizenship skills. They bring legal and governmental resources into the creation of curriculum and instruction and use innovative strategies to encourage critical thinking, cooperative learning, and performance-based assessment techniques. Examples of such programs are Teen Court, Youth Summits, Mock Trials, internships, tutoring, classroom visitations, shadowing and the creation of school-based micro societies where a classroom "becomes" a community in which students take on all the civic functions of the adult world.

Hungary: The Way it Used to Be

For thirty-five years, education in Hungary had been influenced by the Soviet system which followed the social reconstruction theory. This theory states that society can be changed and reconstructed through the complete control of education. The objective is to change society to conform to the basic ideals of the political party or government in power or to create a utopian society through education. Communist education was strictly controlled as to both curricula and methods. The school was intended to prepare students for productive activities. The curriculum focused on science, which is the theory of production and mathematics, the language of science.

The fall of communism has changed much of the content of what is taught in Hungary and who is teaching it. Religious denominations now run about 40 primary and secondary schools. Russian, once compulsory, is seldom taught. German and English are now the most popular languages. The social reconstructivist interpretation of history and economics has been dropped from the curriculum and Hungary's connections with Western Europe are being emphasized[2].

In Hungary schools are funded out of general exchequer funds. The Ministry of Education sets the curricula so that it is standardized in the various types of schools throughout the country. This system generally follows the German model with primary or elementary school followed by four years of secondary school which can be in grammar or vocational curricula. National exams determine entrance into the secondary level as well as into the college or university. About 30% of those over 18 have secondary-school certificates. College and university matriculation is very competitive with approximately 10% of the population with university degrees, a quarter of them in engineering and economics.

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[2] 5, Steve. "Hungary: travel survival kit:. Lonely planet, Hawthorne, Australia, 1994.

There's Something Happening There

Hungary is increasing in the diversity of its population. The vast majority are Magyars but of the approximately 10 million people who live in Hungary, 600,000 are Gypsies, 2% consider themselves German, 1% are Slovaks, 90,000 are Croatian or other south Slavs. The relative stable economy is also drawing legal and illegal immigrants from the Ukraine, Transylvania, Africa and China.

The removal of the soviet presence in Hungary has allowed change. As the government and economy moves toward democracy and capitalism, the role of the citizens of Hungary must change. It is in the schools that it is possible to witness the reawakening of citizens to the reality of the responsibilities that came with the freedom they sought. Here, with the help of nongovernmental organizations such as Civitas, the skills of civic participation are beginning to be taught.

As a visitor to Hungary in 1996, I found decision-making at the local level, with the principal and parent advisory group setting the specific operation of each school. There is an interesting mix of the traditional with the experimental and a growing commitment to civic education.

At Szegad, a visit to Textilipari Szkkozepiskola (Textile Industrial Vocational High School) revealed a fledgling pilot in bringing civic education to students as a co-curricular activity. The principal explained that the local parent advisory group had approved the use of a two-hour activity block each week as a forum for the discussion of social and civic issues. Young women (classes were segregated according to gender) were studying, through the inquiry method, the problems of poverty

in the new economy. A discussion was led by a young teacher as the students responded to prompts and volunteered their viewpoints. In Budapest and Debrecen, I met with teachers who are leading their colleagues into collaboration in order to bring the social sciences into the classroom.

Teachers in Hungary who are pioneering civic education curricula, have begun to meet in central locations in order to share experiences related to creating a tradition of civic education. These voluntary associations are supported by Civitas-Association for Teaching Civic Knowledge and Skills in Budapest. This non-government organization is a member of the Civitas[3] network. It supplies instructional materials and opportunities for in-services. This is an innovative move as there appeared to be no tradition of in-service education for teachers in Hungary. Once certified there is no requirement for continuing education unless a teacher is seeking an advanced degree. The experience of participating in workshops and share sessions with other teachers is a significant practice of collaboration and civic responsibility.

At the college and university level the challenge of opening curriculum to the social sciences is no less. A dialogue with the President's staff at Los Kossuth University in Debrecen revealed an understanding of the need to incorporate a more inclusive perspective into courses of study. It was also apparent that moving beyond awareness to application was not something these professors and administrators were capable of doing without considerable consultation with more experienced educators in other democratic societies.

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[3]An informal international network of individuals and organizations being formed to strengthen civic education and educational democracy throughout the world.

An Observation

The limitations of government, at any level, to create more civically competent citizens should be recognized. In the United States, with a long tradition of civic education or in Hungary, where that tradition has been interrupted, it is the partnership between government and nongovernmental organizations and law related professions that will fuel responsible citizenship and facilitate change. This can be done by providing the resources and the encouragement for teachers to create curriculum that produces well-educated citizens, not just in the natural sciences but in the behavioral and social sciences. Teachers too learn this by doing, by being involved in the processes of civic education.

Systems are difficult to reform from within. Unless there is significant interaction with others who desire change and those who have the resources to facilitate change, it is unlikely to occur. Finding room for improvement in a school system that has a tradition of civic education involves changing the instructional approach. Moving students and teachers outside the limitations of the walls of the classroom and into the world where skills are applied. Adding a focus on civic education in a system unused to the tradition of the social sciences and participatory learning, requires a commitment that must come from outside the educational institution as well as within.

As I sat with Hungarian and American teachers at the Civitas Teacher's Club in Budapest, I felt a connection with all teachers willing to take risks so that education can progress. These civic education teachers in Hungary believe in what they are doing. They are committed to their students and to learning the lessons of citizenship. Although we could speak little of each others' language we understood exactly what each was experiencing. The disapproval of some colleagues, the suspicion of some administrators and a reluctance from students who have learned the procedures

of the "drill and kill" process of teaching. We had all been there, this place of risk taking and we would all go there again. But in this classroom, at this time, teachers from two continents communicated.

The best news for teachers in the U.S. and Hungary is that change in citizenship education has support. Through the actions of organizations such as the Florida Law Related Education Association and Civitas, teachers everywhere can become aware of, then committed to, and skilled enough in innovative civic education techniques to create active learning environments which produce well-educated citizens. Citizens who know how to build and sustain healthy civic environments and maintain democratic institutions.